DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 277 982 CS 008 624

AUTHOR Greif, Ivo P.
TITLE A Study of the Pronunciation of Words Containing Adjacent Vowels.
PUB DATE [83]
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Articulation (Speech); Instructional Effectiveness; *Phonology; Primary Education; *Pronunciation Instruction; Reading Ability; *Reading Instruction; Reading Research; *Teaching Methods; *Vowels; Word Lists

ABSTRACT

To determine the usefulness of the commonly taught phonics rule, "only pronounce the first vowel in words that contain adjacent vowels" (the VV rule, with the first "v" pronounced with the long vowel sound), two new studies applied it to words with adjacent vowels in several lists and dictionaries. The first study analyzed words containing adjacent vowels from the "New Grolier Webster International Dictionary of the English Language." As a result of this analysis, a word list was compiled, and notations were made concerning each word's conformity (or nonconformity) with the pronunciation rule. Results indicated that several word elements had "regular" pronunciations, even though these pronunciations did not conform to the VV rule. Findings also showed that people tend to disregard syllables when pronouncing words and that, in a surprisingly large number of words, the dictionary indicated equally acceptable one- and two-syllable pronunciations for the same element. Only 14.7% of the words analyzed could be correctly pronounced using the VV rule. Using the supplement to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the second study revealed that only 6.9% of the words with adjacent vowels could be correctly pronounced using the VV rule. Findings showed that the VV rule becomes less useful as the vocabulary of a language develops. Overall conclusions from the two studies indicated that teaching the VV rule is not useful in the early grades and becomes even less useful as the reader's skill increases. A review of previous research in the field is included. (JD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED277982

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

A Study of the Pronunciation of Words Containing Adjacent Vowels

by

Ivo P. Greif Ed. D.

Professor of Education - Reading

Illinois State University

Normal, Illinois 61761

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Ivo P. Greif

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS008624

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"A Study of the Pronunciation of Words
Containing Adjacent Vowels"
by
Ivo P. Greif, Ed.D.

This article concerns the usefulness of the commonly taught "when two vowels go walking" phonics rule.

Introduction

In almost every elementary school across the nation, a major portion of the first three years of reading instruction is devoted to teaching children phonics. The children are expected to learn literally dozens of phonics "rules," and many, many hours are devoted to practicing the application of those rules, in the hope that children will become independent in using them to detemine the pronunciation of words.

Among the most widely known, and earliest taught, phonics rules is the one frequently stated in this form: "When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking." A more correct statement would be "When pronouncing words which contain adjacent vowels, the first vowel is pronounced as the long vowel sound, and the other is not pronounced." This article is concerned with the usefulness of that rule (hereafter written "$\bar{V}V$ rule").

There should be little disagreement among educators that any phonics rules which children are expected or required to learn and use should have a sound basis in fact, and that they should produce the correct pronunciation when properly used.

Previous Research

One of my first concerns was to review the research to determine, if possible, to what extent origin of the $\overline{V}V$ rule was based on fact. This was done with the help of some fifty graduate students in five reading research classes, whose task it was to read, report, analyze, and evaluate reading research. They read more than 4,000 research articles, and they did not locate any research on which the $\overline{V}V$ rule (or any other phonic rule, for that matter) was originally based. In the past three years I have asked audiences at every session I have attended at 10 different reading conferences for leads on research which produced any phonics rules. No one could give me a single lead. Apparently this $\overline{V}V$ rule, and all the rest, came into being as a result of something other than a systematic study of words and their pronunciation. Silvaroli supports this view in his comments on Clymer's research (in Gentile, et al., 1983, pp. (126-8). However, some excellent, comparatively recent research pertinent to the usefulnes of phonic rules was located.

The earliest research to come to my attention was reported by Theodore Clymer at the International Reading Association Convention in St. Louis in May 1961. Clymer used a list of 2,600 primary-grade words, using all the words in four basic series and the Gates Reading Vocabulary for the Primary Grades. From these 2,600 words, he identified 553 words containing adjacent vowels, only 47% of which (or 259 words) could be

pronounced correctly by using the V̄V rule (Clymer, 1961).

A similar research project by Clymer was reported in the January 1963 Reading Teacher. In that report, using a similar word list of 2,600 words, 686 words containing adjacent vowels were identified, only 45% of which (or 309) words could be pronounced correctly by using the V̄V rule (Clymer, 1963).

Mildred Bailey reported related research in which she compiled a list of 5,773 words from vocabularies used in grades one through six in eight widely used basal series. From these words, she identified 1,732 words containing adjacent vowels, only 34% of which (or 586 words) could be pronounced correctly by using the V̄V rule (Bailey, 1967).

Robert Emans also reported research very similar to that done by Clymer and Bailey. He selected a 10% random sample of words considered above fourth-grade level from the Thorndike-Lorge Teacher's Workbook of 30,000 Words. From the resulting list of 1,944 words, he identified 480 words which contained adjacent vowels, only 18% of which (or 87 words) correctly could be pronounced by using the V̄V rule (Emans, 1967).

Alvina Treut Burrows and Zyra Lourie reported results of research in which they used the 5,000 words of highest frequency of use from the Rinsland List. They identified 1,728 words which contained adjacent vowels. Only 39% of these (or 668 words) correctly could be pronounced by using the V̄V rule (Burrows and Lourie, 1963).

Dzama, using a list of 2,025 words made by taking a random sample of the sight vocabulary acquired by 225 first-graders, identified 697 words with adjacent vowels, 41% of which (or 285 words) correctly could be pronounced using the "$\overline{V}V$ rule" (Dzama, 1975).

Bieri used Feinstein's Programmed College Vocabulary 3600 as the source of the 1,495 words he used, but he did not indicate the total number of words with adjacent vowels on his list. He reported that only 6% of them correctly could be pronounced using the "$\overline{V}V$ rule" (Bieri, 1977).

Caldwell used the 18,000 most frequently used words from the 1967 Kucera-Francis list, and of the 6,058 words with adjacent vowels in that number, reported that only 26% of them (or 1,728 words) correctly could be pronounced using the "VV rule" (Caldwell, et al., 1978).

Vine used a list of 958 words containing adjacent vowels found in the first- and second-grade books of three series which she named and "several others," plus the Harris-Jacobsen Core List, and of these, she reported only 41% (or 394 words) correctly could be pronounced using the "$\overline{V}V$ rule" (Vine, 1978).

Affleck analyzed a list of 6,000 words, grades 1 through 6, arranged into 3 vocabularies, from the Thorndike-Lorge Teacher's Workbook of 30,000 Words. She reported a range of utilities from 49 to 54%, presuming correct syllabification was done first (Affleck, 1969).

The above information on utility of the $\bar{V}V$ rule from previous research is summarized in Table I, below.

Table 1

Utility of the "$\bar{V}V$ Rule" as Found by Ten Previous Researchers

Researcher	# of VV Words in Their Sample	# Not Conforming to VV Rule	# Conforming to VV Rule	Percent of Utility
Clymer (1961)	553	294	259	47%
Clymer (1963)	686	377	309	45%
Burrows and Lourie (1963)	1728	1060	668	39%
Bailey (1967)	1732	1146	586	34%
Emans (1967)	480	393	87	18%
Affleck (1969)[2]				49-54%
Dzama (1975)	697	682	285	41%
Bieri (1978)[1]				6%
Vine (1978)	958	564	394	41%
Caldwell (1978)	6058	4780	1728	26%
Greif (1981)	37,828	32,527	5301	14%

[1]Bieri reported only percent of utility.

[2]Affleck reported only a range of utility over 3 vocabularies.

Note that when the VV rule was used on word lists in Clymer's studies, the correct pronunciation was produced a little less than half the time, but it produced the correct pronunciation considerably less than half the time when used in the words in the other eight studies. It appears that as one moves from lists of words appropriate to the primary grades, to words considered middle

grades and above, such as on Bailey's, Emans', Caldwell's, and Bieri's lists, the utility drops markedly. It generally is known that lower elementary grade vocabularies are selected so they include a clearly disproportionate share of words which provide opportunity for successful application of the phonic rules being taught. Without this purposeful disproportion, the utility probably would be considerably less at the lower grades.

Two New Research Projects

Students and teachers frequently have asked me if there is any research on the utility of phonic rules on all the words found in the dictionary. Other than the research done by Greif (1980), (1981), there hasn't been any. The two research projects reported herein were done in partial response to those questions.

For the first study, the basic word list used was the 138,000 word entry the New Grolier Webster International Dictionary of the English Language.[1]

All of the words containing adjacent vowels in the Grolier dictionary were used, as well as the variant forms which were listed for them. All words containing two or more adjacent vowels were written onto a list and notation was made concerning their conformity or non-conformity with the rule based on pronunciation shown in that dictionary. In words with two or more sets of adjacent vowels, the word was considered not in conformity if the pronunciation of only any one set was incorrect. If the pronunciation of

[1]The Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary and the Random House American Dictionary were used as references.

other sets of adjacent vowels in the same word was incorrect, the word was still counted as only one instance. There were thousands of words with double sets of adjacent vowels. Upon completion of the list, it was completely re-checked.

In the course of the study it became apparent that some elements in words seemed to have quite regular pronunciations, even though those pronunciations did not conform to the "$\overline{V}V$ rule." Those were a) words in which adjacent vowels occurred in either -sion or -tion, b) words in which each of the adjacent vowels was in a different syllable, and c) words ending in ier, iest, ied, etc.

Close examination of the words containing -tion and -sion indicated that while they were not in accord with the "$\overline{V}V$ rule," they were always pronounced the same, and therefore subject to a separate rule, which would have virtually 100% accuracy. Accordingly 1,791 words (1,599 ending in -tion, 192 ending in -sion) were removed from the list. This improved the final percent of utility of the $V\overline{V}$ rule.

Casual observation shows that people tend to disregard syllables when pronouncing words. They shouldn't, perhaps, but they do. In addition, dictionaries indicate equally acceptable one- and two-syllable pronunciations for the same element in a surprisingly large number of words. Making a distinction between adjacent vowels which are in one syllable, and adjacent vowels each of which is in adjacent syllables, is something people generally do not do. If they attempted to, they would not be very successful. The

research previously referred to done by Clymer, Bailey, Emans, Dzama, and Bieri also indicates the common syllabification guidelines are very undependable. Accordingly, words with adjacent vowels, each of which are in a separate syllable, were kept in the list.

On further examination,words ending in ier, while rarely in conformity with the $\overline{V}V$ rule, were not regularly pronounced, there being three usual ways, eye ur, ee ur and yer (or yur, yir). Words ending in iest likewise rarely in conformity with the rule, were pronounced either ee ist, ee ust, ee est, or yest (or yust). Words ending in ied were usually prounounced long e or long i, with no way to determine which is correct. Therefore, all words ending in ier, iest, and ied were left remaining in the list.

The final list of words analyzed for this study contained 36,037 words which contained adjacent vowels. In only 5,301 of these words could the adjacent vowel element correctly be pronounced using the $\overline{V}V$ rule. Some of these words might be pronounced incorrectly because of other elements in them. That is only 14.7% utility. For this study, it was presumed that no errors would be made a) in recognizing the spelling clues indicating the rule, b) in choosing the correct rule, c) in correctly applying the rule, d) in determining syllables when required, nor e) in determining accent when required. In actual practice, when children apply the rule to words the pronunciation of which they don't know, one or more such errors are quite likely to occur. An error in any one

or more of these would reduce the already low utility.

For the second study, the word list was the entire listing of more than 6,000 words in the Merriam-Webster dictionary supplement, 6000 Words, which contains new words that became firmly established in the language during the 70s. The procedure and assumptions were the same as in the first study. A total of 1,552 words containing adjacent vowels were identified, and in these, 6.6% (or 102 words) the adjacent vowel element correctly could be pronounced using the $\overline{V}V$ rule.

In this second study there were 78 words ending in -sion or -tion, and removing them improves the correctness of results when using the rule to 6.9%.

Several other observations were made in this study. In 6000 Words very few variant forms were listed. Even so, the proportion of these 6000 words having adjacent vowels appeared much greater in this study than in the study using the Grolier Dictionary list. Also, the adjacent vowel element correctly could be pronounced in considerably fewer of them. This seems to indicate that as the language develops with the addition of new words, the $\overline{V}V$ rule becomes less useful.

A utility of 14.7% and 6.9% as obtained in these two new studies is clearly lower than the 47, 45, 34, 41, 26, 41 and 38% reported by six other researchers. However, it is not so much different from the 18 and 6% reported by Emans and Bieri, who excluded early-grade word lists from their word source.

Teaching children to learn and apply the "two vowels go walking" rule clearly is not useful in the early grades. In fact, even at the highest utility reported, 47%, it is woefully ineffective.

The two new studies herein reported, with those of Emans and Bieri, make it clear that the rule becomes less and less useful for readers in the middle and upper grades, and for adult readers.

The conclusion seems obvious. The evidence clamors for discontinuing the teaching and use of the so-called $\overline{V}V$ rule at every level.

Children deserve something better than to be taught a phonic rule which is less than 50% effective on words used in the primary grades, and is less and less effective as they advance through the grades.

Could children easily learn to read with a "look-think the meaning" vocabulary if we were willing to learn how to teach it?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Affleck, Muriel A. "Phonic Principles in Intermediate Reading," Reading Improvement, 1969, Vol. 6, pp. 69-77.

Bailey, Mildred Hart. "The Utility of Phonic Generalizations in Grades One Through Six," The Reading Teacher, Vol. 20, February 1967, pp. 413-418.

Bieri, Alan. "Utility of Phonics Generalizations at the College Level," unpublished Master's Thesis, Rutgers University, 1977.

Burrows, Alvina, and Lourie, Zyra. "When Two Vowels Go Walking," The Reading Teacher, Vol. 17, 1963, pp. 79-82.

Caldwell, Edward C.; Roth, Sandra R.; and Turner, Ralph R. "A Reconsideration of Phonic Generalizations," Journal of Reading Behavior, X, 1978, pp. 91-96.

Clymer, Theodore. "Utility of Forty-three Phonic Generalizations," unpublished paper reported on and distributed at IRA-NCRE Convention, St. Louis, May 5, 1961.

Clymer, Theodore. "The Utility of Phonic Generalizations in the Primary Grades," The Reading Teacher, Vol. 16, January 1963, pp. 252-258.

Dzama, Mary Ann. "Comparing Use of Generalizations in Phonics in LEA, Basal Vocabulary," The Reading Teacher, February 1975, pp. 466-472.

Emans, Robert. "The Usefulness of Phonic Generalizations Above the Primary Grades," The Reading Teacher, Vol. 20, February 1967, pp. 419-425.

Greif, Ivo. P. "A Study of the Pronunciation of Words Ending in a Vowel-Consonant-Final E. Pattern," The Reading Teacher, December, 1980, pp. 290-292.

Gentile, Hamil, and Blanchard, Reading Research Revisited, Columbus, Ohio: Chas. E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1983, pp. 126-128.

Gilman, E., and Pease, R. (Senior Editors). 6000 Words, A Supplement to Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Springfield, Mass.: G and C Merriam Co., 1976.

Greif, Ivo P. "When Two Vowels Go Walking, They Should Get Lost," The Reading Teacher, January 1981, pp. 459-460.

Vine, Ruth. "When There Are Two Vowels Side by Side, Does the Rule 'When Two Vowels Go Walking . . . ' Apply More Often Than Not in First and Second Grade Basal Reading Series?" Master's Thesis, Kean College, New Jersey, 1978, ERIC ED 159-598.